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ABSTRACT

The term "collaborative writing" is a broad term, but should not be confused with coauthorship. Defining collaborative writing as merely coauthoring suggests that students continue producing texts for texts' (and evaluations') sake, whereas defining collaborative writing as community writing implies that students use language and texts to make meaning and community together. Assignments cannot be made "collaborative" or social merely by having students coauthor them. In a collaborative writing effort, individual members of the group gather relevant information and ideas, which are then contributed to the group project. Whatever a group member finds must be presented in such a way that it can become the property of the group. Each piece of information must be: (1) in writing, (2) photocopiable, and (3) comprehensible to and usable by the rest of the group. When involved in collaborative writing, students become engaged in a sequence of textual experiences governed by real purposes, projects, and audiences--situations that require and thus motivate learning writing to carry out individual and communal impulses to come to know, inform, and influence. (AEW)

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What Do We Mean by "Collaborative Writing" (And What Difference Might It Make)?

Not long ago, somewhere between New York City and Minneapolis, the intellectual universe of our discipline was abruptly altered when the meaning of *writing process* was expanded to include not only *cognitive* process but also *social* process. Even though the move had been in the works for some time—decades, in fact—at the 1984 NYC 4Cs only a few people talked much about writing as social process; but when we met at the 1985 Minneapolis 4Cs we had a new buzz phrase. Social process was hot. Through what might seem to have been nothing more than a terminological slight of mouth, we had radically expanded our domain by making the word *social* signify in our universe of discourse. The result has not been trivial: today we live and move in a different world, one that for practical purposes hardly existed for most of us in 1983 or 1984. Suddenly we are looking at different things, with different eyes; and because our world has been so vastly expanded, it is differently populated. As we explore this new territory, we are coming to see, however dimly and incompletely, new and wondrously different things.

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This paper is about definition and redefinition, and about seeing more and more clearly. I start by mapping out different territories that the term *collaborative writing* can include; I point out what we stand to lose if we allow the meaning of the term to include too little; and I conclude by suggesting an approach to teaching writing that takes advantage of potentials this new world offers us.

Collaborative writing means, at its core, simply this: writing together, writing with the help of others. The first question, then, is, What does *writing together* mean?

In their second "Why Write . . . Together?" article (*Rhetoric Review*, Fall 1986), Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede struggle with the problems of naming and the named. Using a definition of writing together that encompasses only one kind of collaborative writing—that is, varieties of literal *coauthorhsip* and *group authorship*, where two or more people are directly involved in drafting, revising, and producing a piece of writing—they found that 87% of members of professional organizations such as the International City Management Association and the American Psychological Association write at least sometimes as members of teams or groups. They identified seven "organizational patterns" (74) used by writing groups to apportion and arrange responsibilities involved in producing a text. Just one example: a team of co–workers plans or outlines a writing project, and individual members then draft parts which are later compiled and revised by the group. Although Lunsford and Ede lament the limited range of meaning allowed by the terms *coauthorship* and *group writing*, they make no claim that the practices they are studying should be considered ends in themselves; rather, these kinds of writing together are seen as frequently2Deffective *means* of accomplishing pragmatic institutional and professional goals.

Probably no one has done more than Kenneth Bruffee and Patricia Bizzell to call attention to a far broader way of conceptualizing the notion of collaborative writing. In their articles they have mined theoretical and practical implications of

the social–constructionist ideas of such theorists as Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Lev Vygotsky. In so doing, they have pointed toward ways of thinking about collaborative writing that open up wider and richer worlds for our discipline than the notion of literal coauthorship can ever do.

Here's a recent summary by Bruffee:

> Social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community–generated and community–maintained linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or "constitute" the communities that generate them. . . . ("Social Construction" 774)

According to this view, not just when we overtly decide to team up with others to produce a text, but whenever we write (and read and speak and listen) we compose together with those who have been and are members of our discourse communities. Whenever we write we are collaborating with past and present participants in the ongoing conversation through which our reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves are created, constituted, maintained through symbolic action. Language and ways of making meaning are, in this view, community "property" out of which, together, we construct texts, meaning, knowing.

James Boyd White, who is especially concerned with writing–reading relationships in this process, helps us understand how we use language and texts to make meaning and community together. In *When Words Lose Their Meaning* he tells us, first:

> Whenever a person wishes to speak to another, he must speak a language that has its existence outside himself, in the world he inhabits. If he is to be understood, he must use the language of his audience. This language gives him his terms of social and natural description, his words of value, and his materials for reasoning; it establishes the moves by which he can persuade another, or threaten or placate or inform or tease

> him, or establish terms of cooperation or intimacy; it defines his starting places and stopping places and the ways he may intelligently proceed from one to the other. (6)

And then, a few pages later:

> The true center of value of a text, its most important meaning, is to be found in the community that it establishes with its reader. It is here that the author offers his reader a place to stand, a place from which he can observe and judge the characters and events of the world he creates, indeed the world itself. . . . all literature, fictional and nonfictional, necessarily has an ethical and political dimension, for it always entails the definition of at least two roles (writer and reader) and the establishment of a relationship between them that can be seen to have both political and ethical content. (17)

So, what might we lose if we allow *collaborative writing* to mean merely coauthorship? I must say that the two definitions I've isolated are not necessarily incompatible, and I am not attacking the notion or value of coauthorship. My claim is simply that, like *all* authorship, coauthorship functions as the result of something else, namely, the prior existence of a discourse community whose members have entered into relationships based upon shared language, texts, forms, conventions, and so on. Except perhaps in school, the act of coauthoring *never* occurs arbitrarily or as an end in itself. Working and writing together are motivated by shared institutional and discourse–community goals and means; they are enabled by an understanding that different people within organizations or communities can assume complementary roles in getting work done and in producing texts. Texts build upon and are conditioned by other texts; and all texts, insofar as they succeed, succeed by creating "textual communities" (White) which relate writers and readers, giving them places to stand which orient the ways they see and do things.

We are dealing here with a fundamental difference—that between (on the one hand) collaboratively making meaning in community and (on the other) coauthoring a unitary text. Because the one is clearly foundational to the other, providing contingencies and motives, we need to do more than lay on assignments requiring students to write together as coauthors. We need to revise pedagogy to immerse students in the kinds of language communities that make written language—including coauthorship and other kinds of group work—fitting responses to real communicative needs. Unless we do, we stand to miss a grand opportunity to engage students with the richest and most liberating sorts of collaborative writing. Focusing on a means—that is, on group work and coauthorship—as a pedagogical end could mean losing sight of the larger issue of the ways all writing is writing together. Allowing collaborative writing to mean merely coauthoring could mean that students continue producing texts for texts' (and evaluations') sake, whereas allowing collaborative writing to mean "community writing" should mean that students produce texts that genuinely contribute to the meaning making activities of communities.

To conclude, then, I ask you to consider two assignments. The first is from the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*:

> Write an essay that reports information. Choose a subject which you can write about with some confidence and some authority; if necessary, do research to get more information. Before you begin [writing], decide who your readers will be; then, focus the thesis so as to engage their interest and inform them about the topic. (153)

This all–too–typical writing assignment's reason for being is to involve students in dummy run writing. The assignment casually betrays its artificiality in its attention first to (teacher–specified) form, mode, and purpose, then to subject, then to the writer's ethos, and only then (and only perfunctorily) to audience—even though, surely, what we know about writing (and about learning to write) tells us

that the urge to write such an essay would never arise except in a context in which there would be a social—*collaborative*—need to tell someone something.

But the point I really want to make is this: Such assignments cannot be made "collaborative" or social by the mere expedient of having students coauthor them. Contextless, unpragmatic, dry-run writing is contextless, unpragmatic, dry-run writing—whether it's done by students writing alone or by students writing as coauthors. The way to collaborative writing is not to be found in laying onto such a pedagogy a requirement to draft, revise, and edit in pairs or groups.

Finally, I ask you to look at excerpts from the eleventh of over twenty-five assignments or "prompts" used in a one-semester, sophomore-junior level course entitled "A Community of Playwrights." This course is organized as a student-conducted collaborative study of a literary community—an attempt to come to understand how a group of playwrights and other literary figures worked together to achieve common literary and social ends. By the time the students received this prompt, they had already done a great deal of library research, working alone and in groups, reading about different communities of playwrights and reporting their findings (mainly through team-authored oral and written reports) to their groups and to the class as a whole. Their collaborative inquiry has led them to choose to study a community whose "center" is Lillian Hellman. They have been immersed in texts—the teacher's, the literature's, and their own; and out of that immersion they have negotiated workable speaker/writer-listener/reader functions, roles, and relationships. Since they are engaged in a collaborative study, they have developed powerful motives for communicating; and they are discovering means to satisfy those motives. Because they are engaged in an actual "unending conversation" (Burke 110), none of the rhetorical foundations for their participation needs to be invented for the purposes of an assignment.

I will call attention only to some of the more important features implicit and

explicit in this assignment. Look, for example, at the following paragraphs:

> On Monday we talked first about differences between what I called the "primary group" of authors and the "secondary group" of authors. The primary group consists of the actual members of the community we will be studying; the secondary group consists of all those who have talked and who continue to talk about the primary group (usually, but not always, in print: we are members of the secondary group).
>
> We agreed that, now we've decided on a group to study, we need to identify more exactly just who the members of the community were. Our next step, then, involves looking around in the literature to come up with some names. It became clear that, before we can proceed much further in our investigation, we need to learn more about who the major and minor primary figures were and how (in what secondary library resources) we are going to learn about them. I suggested that we needed to come to know these "key people" not only as individuals, but also as members of community.

And look also at these paragraphs:

> Today's most important activity involves surveying what we've got and how it might be useful. But this might not mean what you think it means. In the context of this course and the way it's organized, "what you've got" has to mean two things: first, it has to refer to the information and ideas you've come up with; and second, it has to refer to the ready availability (or, perhaps, the "deliverability") of that information and those ideas to the rest of us for all our use. If what you've found is not transformed into a form that makes it available to the rest of us, to the group as a whole, it can't be of much use to the group. You'll have it, but we won't.
>
> We must, then, think in terms of *how we can contribute*. Each

> member of the whole group individually gathers relevant information and ideas which she or he then contributes to the whole group, so that any or all of us can, if we need to, use each other's findings to advance our own and the group's inquiries. If the job of each of us to to give what we have to the group, then whatever we find has to be put into some "contributable" form; it must be presented in such a way that it can become the "property" of the group. We all need to know, as best we can, what's important in what you know.
>
> What this means, of course, is that it must be (1) in writing; (2) photocopiable; and (3) comprehensible to and useable by the rest of us.

Now, just four observations relating to these paragraphs. First, the student community is firmly grounded in texts emanating from the larger discourse community outside the classroom—through the prompts of the instructor and through the primary and secondary literature the students are reading in the library. More than that, the students have come to know and have taken over as their own the "topics of conversation," the language, and even some of the ways of making meaning they have found in that literature.

Second, because their inquiry is grounded in actual discourse, they do not need to choose a subject or pretend to knowledgeability and authority, and neither must they invent reasons for writing; they have all these by virtue of the reading and writing they have done within already functioning discourse communities—the larger one outside the class, represented in the literature, and the smaller one they have helped to create within the class. These conditions are all givens of the students' rhetorical situation.

Third, the primary aim of this prompt is not to get the students to produce texts (though that is an outcome). The aims of the prompt are the same as those of all the texts which swirl through this discourse subcommunity—to help orient, sustain, and move the project forward.

And fourth, the texts which result from this prompt will not be evaluated by "literary" standards, but by pragmatic needs and consequences. The important question is not, "Is this 'good' writing?" but, "Does this writing advance the inquiry?" And: the writing is not graded by the teacher; it is used (or not used) by the group.

In such a course the students become engaged in a sequence of "textual experiences" governed by real purposes, projects, and audiences—situations that require and thus motivate learning writing in use to carry out individual and communal impulses to come to know, inform, and influence. In such situations, students are (in Polanyi's terms) focally attentive to a scholarly investigation they are engaged in. Except at stuck points, they are not thinking about writing per se. But because writing, in a multiplicity of uses and forms, is an essential means by which the inquiry is undertaken, they are always subsidiarily attentive to this question: How can we use what we are learning to carry our project forward? The point is, this is not dry– run writing to prepare students for lives hereafter: this is writing serving actual, pragmatic functions. And that, in my mind, is what we should mean by collaborative writing.

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